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AN INTERPRETATION OF CHINA

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After unpleasant experiences with the external world for over half a century, the knock of the Western Powers has at last been heard in China. To-day the old Dragon has awakened from her constitutional drowsiness and habitual isolation, and is ready and eager to play her part in the world drama. She has come to the world, or more correctly, the world has gone to her. No shirking on either side, each has to meet the other squarely face to face. China, as a nation, must either rise or fall forever. Whichever way it may turn out, she is going to exert a world-wide influence upon future history and affect the course of modern civilization. Viewed from the commercial and political standpoint, China is indeed a tremendously important and interesting problem—a problem looming larger and larger on the horizon of the world's consciousness, and engaging more and more its attention and thought.

More and more attempts are being made to study the country. More travelers now penetrate into that still mysterious land, and more scientists make researches and investigations—merely to increase the world's stock of human knowledge. Last but not least in importance are the press comments which appear frequently in periodicals or dailies. But as the writers have been other than Chinese, the situation is often viewed from a different angle. I attempt here to assume the task of treating the subject from an impartial viewpoint as comprehended by a Chinese student.

China is a typical example of arrested development. A contemporary of Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria, she is accredited to have a history of 5000 years. Her inventions and discoveries like the mariner's compass, block printing, and gunpowder were known respectively as early as the twenty-seventh, fourth century, B.C., and the third century A.D. The institutions of laws, marriage and other customs now extant were firmly established about 1000 B.C. Her greatest minds like Laotze, Confucius and Mencius were

produced 300 B.C. In a word, the monuments of Chinese civilization antedate the Christian era. Since that time, a period of over 2000 years has elapsed, and China has produced no minds comparable to the ancient trio, and for over fifteen centuries has made no new inventions worth speaking of. Up to a comparatively recent date, no change in her ideals and institutions, political, social, ethical, and educational, had taken place. Then all of a sudden, after 2000 years, she evinced signs of change. China has presented three distinctive periods: an attempt is here made to study each period and to offer an explanation of the phenomena of each.

I. Period of Progress

Roughly speaking, this period extended from the creation to the beginning of the Christian era. Like any other nation, China began with a tribe in the province of Shansi. Surrounded by naturally hostile tribes, conflicts between the Chinese and the aborigines followed, and the former, on account of their superiority in strength, survived. By conquest, China gained more territory and population; by intermarriage and assimilation, her blood became enriched, her ideals and institutions became broadened and strengthened. As long as there were hostile tribes around the Chinese, constant conflicts arose. In order to survive, efficiency had to be kept up or increased. With conquests, the nation grew in territory, population, organization, civilization, and ambition. The more she conquered, the more she wanted to conquer until there was nothing more for her to conquer, or she was stopped by some insurmountable barrier. By this time, her intellect and civilization came to a standstill. The career of China's formative conquest came to a close about 220 B.C. The country was then bounded by Chili on the north, Kwangtung on the south, the Pacific Ocean on the east, and Thibet on the west. Feudalism, the cause of her activity and progress, now gave place to absolute monarchy. She settled down with no further motive to strive. She built a great wall on the north, reorganized the country into provinces under thirty satraps, burned all the books, melted all weapons, and exterminated all the daring scholars. The Emperor had come to reign unto eternity; the people and the country were his property. The formation of the country was now complete, and this leads to the second period.

II. Period of Stagnation

This lasted from the beginning of the Christian era to 1840 A.D. It may be called a period of fluctuating stagnation. Since that historic Emperor who dreamed of reigning forever, eighteen different dynasties have followed each other. With every dynastic change, there was always more or less commotion and change in the laws and methods of government, but such commotion was always short in duration and internal in character, and such changes were changes of mere form, not of spirit and substance. When the history of the last two thousand years was summed up, China was not a bit more advanced in her ideals, arts, and institutions than she was at the beginning of the Christian era. In fact, had it not been for the little exercise of her national spirit she had every century, her energy and life would have long ago ebbed away. As it was, signs of backwardness and primitiveness were to be detected everywhere. Naturally, the question that arises is what were the underlying causes. Were there not the Tartars about 100 B.C. on the north, the Thibetans on the west, the Japanese on the east, and the Indo-Chinese on the south with whom the Chinese could contend? Right here we discover the cause of stagnation. The Tartars became amalgamated with the Chinese about the third century A.D. They adopted the Chinese civilization, and with them Mongolia came into the possession of China. Thibet was a region too mountainous; the Thibetans were in a low state of civilization, and their Dalai-lamas readily acknowledged Chinese sovereignty. The same applied to Anam, Siam, and Burmah, with the exception that these were level countries. On the east, the Koreans were reduced to a tributary nation, and as for the Japanese, they were separated from the mainland by a then impassable sea. There being no strong motive for a conflict, the Chinese, except for the expedition of Kublai Khan, never attempted to cross the sea and match strength with that people. Since the Tartars taught nothing to the Chinese, and since the Thibetans and the Indo-Chinese learned from the Chinese, what could or would elevated China learn? Furthermore, by this time, the nation had forgotten the causes of her early progress, and the people were thinking that they alone were the anointed people to remain supreme on earth. Under such circumstances, would they stoop to learn from inferior civilizations? Since China did not get anything, was not

the presence of these less civilized peoples around her tantamount to the absence of a rival or competitor? What could then be more logical as an outcome of the situation than the exaltation and maintenance by the Chinese of their own civilization leading to stagnation and the cessation of all progress?

The courses of the first and second historic periods have been briefly traced. Putting the matter into a nutshell, it was tribal assimilation and intercommunication that formed the nation, and later it was national isolation that arrested its development. In general, the effects of isolation are known; in detail, they are not. Narrowing down the consideration of its effects to those which act within the nation, it is sad to note how disastrous they have been to China. If we survey the forces operating in Chinese civilization, the whole is centered about Confucianism, the embodiment of all early Chinese culture. Like all other systems of philosophy, it has its strong points as well as its weak ones. It was Confucianism that made China; it was the overdoing of Confucianism that was the unmaking of China. The overdoing of Confucianism to which is traceable some of the major evils in Chinese civilization will be discussed here under three headings:

i. *Intellectual Backwardness.*—Confucianism advocates the superiority of antiquity. From that follows the corollary: "Love thy parents and reverence the Emperor." As the emperor is the head of heads, loyalty to the emperor precedes filial devotion to parents. The emperor being absolute over his subjects as the father over his children, it became his interest to inculcate unquestioning obedience in his subjects. According to the old conception of government, the best way of bringing this about was ignorance. So the emperor, who like the famous French monarch identified himself with the state, took no steps whatever to promote the intelligence of the people. On the other hand, he did everything he could to enthrall their intellect and eradicate their intelligence, as was shown by the holocaust made of liberalizing books, the killing of daring thinkers, the institution of the "eight-legged" essay, the encouragement of civil officials, and the contempt for military men. It was the interest of the state to preserve its traditions and to strengthen their sanctions. So the people, as the ruled, had no genuine encouragement from the state. Under such circumstances, no national compulsory education existed, and not many

went to school. But those who went in the face of so many restrictions and stumbling-blocks did not get an intelligent education. Moreover, being a more or less primitive country, in which hardly anything was very much developed, travelling was very difficult and dangerous. In consequence, little travelling was done. Everybody stayed at home and not many ventured out of the town. Few indeed went out of the province, and then only on an official errand or to seek a living. Most of those who could afford to study learned from their fathers or the class of hereditary teachers, while those who could not worked as their fathers did. Thus the scholar remained the scholar; the laborer, the laborer. In the scholar's family, the father taught the son, the son the grandson, and so on for centuries. In the laborer's family, the father handed down whatever experience he had accumulated in a lifetime to the son, the son to the grandson, and so on, always the same stock of ideas and experiences. What could be the result of such a process? In both classes, there was no broadening of the intellect, but a deepening of prejudices. In fact, education was more and more lifeless and narrow, the scholars became more and more bigoted and self-sufficient, and the intelligence of the people fell lower and lower. This was why China has not been able to produce a world mind, or an immortal book, or an epoch-making invention for the last twenty centuries.

2. *Economic Poverty*.—To understand why China had so few traders to follow the pursuit of domestic or foreign trade, we must go back to the family, the unit of the Chinese society. The keynote of the Chinese family is "Love thy Parents," one of the Confucian commandments. It is the imperative duty of the children to make the parents happy and allow no semblance of sorrow ever to cross their path. In order to see that they are happy, they have to be at home. The unenlightened parents, having nothing better to occupy their minds, indulged themselves in an intense craving to see grandchildren about them. Accordingly, they married their children early when the contracting parties hardly understood what matrimony was, much less the responsibilities therein involved. The outcome was the reckless production of weak offspring. The young husbands not knowing anything of the world, in many cases, still in school, had to fall back on their parents for support—not infrequently permanent support. These

same ignorant parents not satisfied with seeing the marriage of one generation and its offspring generally proceeded to marry their grandchildren as fast as they could grow, or as long as there was a cent in their leaking purse, or a chance to borrow, in order that they might be fructified and be sure before their death that the family worship would be carried on. Two things resulted from this unconditional obedience to parents: (a) Weak, helpless children were born to replenish the nation, to whom life could not but be a burden; (b) ever expanding families living on an ever contracting purse could not but impoverish the nation. In such a suffocating atmosphere, how could trade thrive? Who would be willing to absent himself from his home, if he could not afford to be away? This explains why China is so populous, and feeble, and poor.

3. *Political Disorganization*.—Because of their complete isolation, and the absence of an adventurous spirit, the inhabitants became self-sufficient; their language and dialects, customs, institutions, and ideals stereotyped; their views intolerant; and their sympathies narrow. In a word, each village was a nation unto itself, and China was a nation composed of a myriad of nations with a myriad of dialects and sympathies, disunited and disintegrating. When a nation is composed of a myriad of units, each speaking a different dialect, and having for its beliefs and views only those sanctioned by the past, how can these units understand, sympathize with, help and join with each other in a common patriotism? This was the cause why China was so backward, conservative and helpless. Such is the result of the overdoing of Confucianism, which brought about national disorganization and isolation.

III. Period of Change

The third period is one of national change, a period of transformation. With the introduction of the facilities of communication, a new epoch has been ushered into China. By means of the steamer, the hitherto impassable ocean is now as it were spanned and every part of the world is made accessible to intercourse and investigation. By means of the telegraph news can be flashed from continent to continent in no time. It was these two things that connected China with the outside world, and with their advent, China entered upon a new chapter of her history. Among the things which the steamer and the telegraph made possible are:

1. *International Commerce.*—China had little trade with the world till the middle of the last century, from which time its international commerce may be said to date. With the coming of merchants for the first time in many centuries, our own business men encountered new ideals, new methods, and new practices. To be able to accommodate themselves to each other, they found they had to deviate from the time-honored methods and make the necessary re-arrangements. Although China has been exploited financially, it must be said, however, that she has not been altogether without benefit therefrom. The utter inadequacy of her traditional methods has been exposed, the obsoleteness of her antiquated ideals and practices shown up. Further, it has been found that business relations needed to be readjusted and modern commercial laws to be put into operation. What is of the greatest value, it seems, is the broadening of the mental horizon, at the same time accompanied by a new conception of modern business, a new conception of China, and a new conception of the world at large. In short, leaving out of account all the evil consequences, international commerce has done two distinct services: (a) The showing up of the utter inadequacy of existing business methods; (b) the creation of an earnest desire in the mind of the people to know. But its influence is slow and indirect to arouse a nation which has been dreaming for centuries.

2. *International Conflict.*—This factor is very powerful, and has done more to sting the nation to a sense of its corporate consciousness than anything else except modern education, which works rather slowly. Since 1840, China has directly engaged in five wars, and indirectly in one. In 1840, she waged the First Opium war with England, leaving Canton City to bear the brunt of the fight. In 1857, she fought England and France in Chili, which resulted in the sacking of Peking. In 1884, she had a little tussle with France in Tonquin. In 1894, she measured swords with Japan in Korea, because of differences concerning the Hermit Kingdom and Manchuria. In 1900, she struggled with eleven modern Powers, supported by the northern section of the empire. In 1904, the Russo-Japanese war woke up the whole nation. Needless to say, China was no match for the world, but it is interesting to note that the first conflict China had was that of a city against a nation; the second conflict, a province against two nations; the

third conflict, a protectorate against a nation; the fourth conflict, a protectorate and a section against a rising nation; the fifth conflict, half the nation against eleven nations; and in the last conflict, the whole nation viewed the struggle with unutterable anguish and inexpressible mortification. In all these conflicts, there was a progressive awakening. All these war-quakes were really tectonic in character. China had been too much intoxicated with her dreams, and these hard knocks brought her back to her sober senses —to sane thinking and sound judgment.

3. *The Missionary Movement.*—Of this, the soul is, of course, the missionary. As a factor in opening up the country, he has been both beneficial and detrimental. Directly, he is an evangelist, a social reformer, and an educator; indirectly, he is a political factor. As an evangelist, he has broken the spell under which Buddhism and Taoism had held China captive; as a social reformer, he has counteracted the baneful influences of the opium drug which came into the land through international commerce, and also crusaded against the cruel practices of bandaging the foot; as an educational worker, perhaps, he has done his greatest service. He opened the first modern schools in the country; he was the first to introduce modern teaching, he was the first translator of modern books, and lastly the first editor of periodicals, though these, at first, were, of course, of a strictly religious nature. To him must be given the credit for the opening of modern schools in China. But as a political factor, the missionary has often been a curse, causing China loss of territory, life and money, and endangering her sovereignty and even her existence. Such results have done more to hinder than to forward the cause of Christianity in China.

4. *Modern Education.*—The first impetus modern education received in China dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century. The first batch of one hundred and twenty students was sent to America in the early seventies. Later, there was a setback, a reaction against modern education. The craving for education did not really begin till after 1900 when the literati of the country started the exodus to Japan to secure modern training. In 1906, Tokio was literally swamped with Chinese scholars, numbering some 16,000, but now the number is considerably reduced. Most of those who discontinued their studies in Japan found edu-

cational facilities at home which had sprung up in the meantime, while others have gone to Europe and America to seek knowledge at its fountain head. There are about four hundred students in Europe and six hundred in this country. In addition to sending students abroad, an extensive system of schools is being put into effect, and the Board of Education has been created to take charge of the matter.

Aside from schools, there is at present a very active press which furnishes dailies and other periodicals, and discusses all topics, ranging from fiction to all branches of science and religion. The circulation is large, and the average student is always thirsting for news. Besides, thousands of books have been translated, largely from the Japanese. Most of these will have only an ephemeral existence.

After the school and the press come a great many local clubs for the discussion of local government, constitutional government, the family, the school, and so on. Then there are public lecture halls, reading rooms, libraries, and exhibition buildings, though as yet not many of them exist. All these institutions are doubtless very primitive and cannot be expected to come up to the standard of more enlightened countries, but the significant feature of the matter is that modern educational ideals have taken such a firm hold.

To complete the list, mention might be made of the railroad, the steamship, the telegraph, the postal service, the rise of industries, the use of the Kuan Wha (mandarin dialect), the opening of deliberative assemblies, the deep interest in political affairs—these and a hundred others. They are powerful as factors of change. When once called into existence, the rapid changes they make in conditions are to be grasped only by the most imaginative minds. In summing them up, we may say that the primary and secondary factors are but the different forms of the communication, and interchange of ideas.

A word might be added in conclusion. The history of China has worked out exactly as would naturally be expected, and has been a typical example to show the results of isolation for centuries, and more recently of the revivifying effects of communication with the rest of the world. Her early progress was due to the necessity of struggling with her neighbors, her intermediate period

of stagnation to the fact that she had eliminated, by conquest and assimilation, every rival worthy of consideration, and her present awakening to the new forces brought to bear upon her. She moved slowly at first in the path of change, because she had the inertia of twenty centuries. She moves quickly now, because she has overcome that inertia and gained in momentum. Whether the present radical change is leading toward the haven of salvation or the port of destruction, it is too early to predict. But one thing is sure: if the change means a resurrection, it is forever; if it presages a fall, it is a fall forever. The fate of the world hangs upon the future of China.